

# Secondhand Smoke Danger Remains Unproved

By RICHARD MINITER

Not since Carrie Nation burnt into saloons smashing bottles and boozers alike has America seen a moral crusade like the one against smoking and smokers.

Like most prohibition efforts, the anti-smoking movement has little patience for civil liberties or limited government. Despite substantial taxes and regulations on tobacco, anti-smoking activists now want smoking banned in all "public places." This includes not only public parks and government buildings, but privately owned airlines, offices and taverns. Anywhere the public congregates is fair game for strict anti-smoking rules.

The anti-smoking crusaders are winning. Last year, Congress forbade smoking on all domestic flights. Some states even prohibit smoking on buses and public transportation.

San Luis Obispo, Calif., recently became the first city in America to enact a comprehensive ban on smoking in the workplace. Other cities will surely follow.

New York City outlawed cigarette vending machines (except in bars) last October. California is using its 25-cent-a-pack cigarette levy to fund a \$28.6-million advertising campaign against smoking. At least 44 states and 297 cities and counties restrict or forbid smoking in some manner. The growing trend toward eliminating smoking in the workplace will affect over 30 million Americans.

The heavy mantle of anti-smoking morality rests on two pillars: (1) that a person should not be permitted to take any risks no matter how small, and (2) that nonsmokers are harmed by sharing the same air with smokers. "Secondhand smoke" is said to increase the cancer risks of nonsmokers and, therefore, violates the rights of nonsmokers.

The idea that the government should decide which risks people should take is absurd. The amount of risk someone will accept varies from person to person. Some people are willing to risk death and dismemberment climbing mountains or forging steel, while others get sick at the sight of a roller coaster.

Averaging the daring natures of some with the cautious inclinations of others would not satisfy either group. Therefore, any law regulating what risks people may take is bound to be somewhat arbitrary and open to political pressure. So it is with smoking.

Besides, the government doesn't have a good track record for assessing risk. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been squandered by the Environmental Protection Agency and other federal agencies regulating dioxin. While at higher doses dioxin is toxic, at the level of 15 parts per quadrillion it is



SURGEON GENERAL KOOP

harmless. "It's the equivalent of a few drops of vermouth in a martini the size of Lake Erie," as one wag put it. Yet that's the level that the EPA regulates dioxin.

The most irresponsible facet of the secondhand smoke charge is the idea that nonsmokers working alongside smokers face almost the same risk of contracting lung cancer as a three-pack-a-day Marlboro man. While few deny that smokers face a heightened risk of contracting lung cancer, the claim that so-called "secondhand smokers" face a comparable risk is neither sensible nor scientific.

Breathing someone else's cigarette smoke is not the same as smoking

"In a study from France, it was reported that nonsmoking wives, aged 40 years or older, of smokers also had small reductions in some pulmonary function parameters. Although the finding was not consistent across all segments of the population. Eight other studies, however, some of which were quite large, have reported essentially no abnormalities in pulmonary functions in persons chronically exposed to the environmental tobacco smoke of others."

"In summary, therefore, most of the data available indicate that the effects of environmental tobacco smoke on airway function of passively exposed adult nonsmokers varies, as was summarized by an NIH (National Institutes of Health) Workshop Conference, from negligible to quite small."

— Mahajan and Huber  
Seminars in Respiratory Medicine  
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the Medical College of Ohio and Gary L. Huber of the University of Texas Health Center conclude that "probably no other aspect of the tobacco and health issue has had more shoddy research and less reproducible results published." They add:

"...[U]nlike the direct health effects of tobacco smoking on the voluntary consumer, only sparse and not nearly as solid scientific data are available on the health effects of passive smoke inhalation. Far too frequently, reports receiving widespread dissemination have not undergone careful scientific scrutiny.... A significant number of those studies that pertain to the health effects of smoking in the

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yourself. When a smoker draws on a cigarette he receives a concentrated dose of smoke, inhales deeply, retains the smoke briefly in his lungs, and then exhales. The exhaled smoke then diffuses in the air. His nonsmoking companion breathes in a much diluted dose of smoke and doesn't inhale as deeply or as long.

Unsurprisingly, the link between secondhand smoke and disease is weak at best. While then Surgeon General C. Everett Koop's 1986 report stated that "involuntary smoking [sic] is a cause of disease, including lung cancer, in healthy nonsmokers," Koop admitted in the report that the data were sparse. In fact, no study exists which definitively demonstrates an unambiguous link between secondhand smoke and lung cancer.

To a survey of recent studies concerning the "health effects of involuntary smoking," Doctor V. K. Mahajan of

non-smoker... are poorly designed, structurally unsound, uncontrolled, and have major statistical problems."

Small wonder that the *New England Journal of Medicine* recently ran an editorial advising doctors to be cautious in using secondhand smoke studies as the basis for advising lifestyle changes for patients. Many "confounding variables," the prestigious medical journal warned, affect the outcome of such studies.

Although there are thousands of studies of effects of tobacco on smokers, only 25 measure the effects of secondhand smoke. And only a handful of those 25 establish a statistically meaningful link at all.

Here is where the "confounding variables" come into play. Socio-economic class, family history of lung cancer, and even milk intake and physical inactivity have a higher correlation

with lung cancer than secondhand smoke. In fact, the correlation between secondhand smoke and lung cancer is so slight that it falls within the range of statistical error in some studies.

Secondhand smoke studies have other shortcomings. Most studies examine only people already stricken with lung cancer and fail to distinguish nonsmokers from former smokers. And nearly all of the studies surveyed wives or children who lived with chronic smokers — not exactly a good measure of workplace exposure.

As Jacob Sullum observes in *Reason*, "there is very little reason to believe that ETS [environmental tobacco smoke] exposure in the workplace is hazardous. And despite the impression given by anti-smoking activists, there is no evidence that casual, short-term exposure such as that encountered in a restaurant or on an airplane poses a risk to non-smokers."

One of the most thorough studies of passive smoking in a non-home environment — involving passengers on airplanes — was conducted by Dr. Scott Baker, former science adviser at the Environmental Protection Agency and senior staff officer at the National Academy of Sciences.

In an analysis prepared for the Department of Transportation, Baker and his team found "risks from exposure to ETS are not terribly significant," and that the evidence "doesn't really drive one to force a regulation into existence immediately."

The real health problem in air travel, according to the Baker researches, was exposure to cosmic radiation in high-altitude flights. Yet this finding was ignored as Congress rushed to prohibit smoking on domestic airlines. Obviously, the regulations in this case were driven by anti-smoking fervor, not scientific data.

Protecting public health is a worthy goal, but nonsmokers already enjoy a wide spectrum of safeguards. Awareness of the health hazards of smoking is widespread. High taxes and warning labels discourage smoking. Advertising bans, while misguided, have contributed toward the average 3 percent per year decline in cigarette sales. And smoking isn't chic anymore.

Certainly private solutions are not lacking. Many companies have drawn up their own agreements to keep smoking out of the workplace. About 60 percent of employers restrict smoking and 25 percent ban it outright, according to a 1985 study by the Administrative Management Society. Blue chip corporations such as Boeing, Adolph Coors, and the Ford Motor Co. restrict smoking on the job. Concerned workers don't have to trek to city hall to clear the air, just upstairs to see the boss.

But anti-smoking crusaders don't want people to work out their own agreements on smoking. They suffer from an addiction of their own: legislating morality. It's time they went cold turkey.

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